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FOR FAITH AND ACTION

June 2015

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VOICES

## Join God in Action

by Kate Sprutta Elliott

### Does the subject of

giving—especially financial giving to the church—make you uncomfortable? Do you feel awkward when conversations about money come up?

This summer's Bible study, "No Catchy Slogans," looks at Scripture passages about giving. The author, former Women of the ELCA staff member Emma Crossen, writes in her introduction: "Giving money is an important topic for Christians to consider. All people need encouragement and guidance about their relationship to money. Few things affect our daily life more. It seems appropriate that the Bible gives so much attention to money and giving. Yet it's too common to see Bible passages taken out of context, turned into catchy slogans, and enforced as rules that Christians should follow."

One way that people have traditionally dealt with the matter of giving is through tithing, that is, giving a percentage. Regular *Gather* columnist Catherine Malotky takes on this ancient practice. She says, "Many of us come to the question of giving with baggage, sometimes helpful, sometimes not. ... Our challenge is to *respond* to the invitation to live generously, not *react* to it."

Barbara Berry-Bailey, on staff at ELCA Global Mission, reminds us, "When we pray 'give us this day our daily bread,' we must also pray that for those who are hungry. From those who have received much, much is required."

One example of how our giving supports the ministries of the church can be

found in Twila Schock's article about the time she served in a global mission post in Moscow, Russia. She tells of the soup kitchen she managed: "What was the seasoning which made the Moscow Protestant Chaplaincy's soup unique? ... It was an informal coalition of churches who set aside denominational differences and joined hands as we found ourselves serving in a context that could be quite hostile to outside religious influence. Our very presence was a symbol of this Christian alliance."

Giving is one of the ancient faith practices that go back to a time before Jesus, but Jesus certainly addressed it. Karen Melang writes in this issue, "Don't let the words 'faith practices' throw you if you haven't heard them used together before. They are just a new name for what Christians have been doing since the beginning: praying, studying, worshipping, inviting, giving, encouraging, fasting, teaching, offering hospitality, serving, doing acts of mercy, forgiving, healing, living in community, and striving for peace and justice. . . . None of them are new, but naming them shines a light on them that helps us notice what they do. Faith practices deepen our lifelong journey of grace and growth begun at baptism."

And Karen's point is well taken. She goes on to say, "Faith practices can help us see where God's powerful love is at work. They encourage us to notice God and to join God in action." And who doesn't want to join God in action? 🌿

**Kate Sprutta Elliott** is editor of *Gather*.





GIVE US THIS DAY

## Holy Chaos, Wide Grace

by Meta Herrick Carlson

### When the ultrasound

confirmed two tiny heartbeats, I cried.

I was grateful and surprised, but also petrified and defeated. Three-quarter-time solo ministry was already challenging with a toddler at home. How would I manage three kids under the age of three and the demands of my call? In those first moments, fear overwhelmed me and vocations collided. Surely I would have to choose, and surely I would fail!

Thank God for the gift of time. Each week I grew more confident that choices would be bearable and failures redeemable because I wasn't alone. The power and enthusiasm of my loved ones became infectious.

I thank God for the gift of leadership. My parishioners supported my maternity leave and stepped up in my absence. They blessed me with their assurance and vision.

I thank God for the gift of diapers. My congregation hosted a diaper drive to collect enough diapers for the first weeks. Their math was wrong or they are wildly generous—we had diapers for a year!

I thank God for the gift of family. We live near aunts and uncles, godparents and grandparents. Our friends became family and we leaned into their love with reckless abandon.

I thank God for the gift of Matt. My spouse showed patience, courage, and humor when I did not. I found strength when he had none. Together we survived challenges and celebrated victories that have become tangled up with our love for each other.

I thank God for the gift of grace. After several weeks as a recluse in a bathrobe, the people of Zion welcomed me back with great joy. They invited all of who I'd become into their midst, changed by my choices and failures, my gratitude and surprise. I thank God for the gift of no. I found courage in a new default answer. There is great satisfaction in my newfound motto: I am called to some things, not all.

I thank God for the gift of space. My congregation honored new logistics and boundaries as I navigated babysitters and fevers, nursing in my office or bringing a baby to home visits.

I'll never forget the terror I felt in that ultrasound room two years ago. I was right to be afraid because I was about to change.

My expectations, wisdom, and relationships were transformed when my daughters burst into my life. I was right to think there would be choices, and I would fail along the way. I was right to grieve.

But I was wrong to think that this would be the end. I underestimated the power of good gifts that were coming my way in the form of baptismal promises, faith communities, holy chaos, and wide grace. I underestimated the power of the body of Christ and the sneakiness of God's abundance.

The gifts of others have embraced my vulnerability and strengthened me for the journey toward gratitude and surprise to come. Thanks be to God! 🌿

**The Rev. Meta Herrick Carlson** serves as pastor at Zion Lutheran Church in Minneapolis, Minn.



A photograph of two women laughing together outdoors. The woman on the left is older, with short, curly grey hair, wearing a grey cardigan over a teal top and a striped scarf. The woman on the right is younger, with dark hair, wearing a light blue button-down shirt over a grey top. She is holding a white and grey travel mug. A red rectangular box with the text "WITH YOU" in white capital letters is centered over the image.

## WITH YOU

*by Sara Miles*

I work at a church, so every summer I get a fairly incessant barrage of emails from church youth groups all over the country asking if we have any last-minute volunteer opportunities for their coming mission trips to San Francisco. Can 15 or 20 of their teenagers come to our food pantry some Friday and work for us? Do we know about any other service opportunities, since they'll be here for three days and would like to do something for the homeless or other people in need?

They are so nice. And I always feel snappish. Partly it's that our food pantry really can't take groups: We're

just not big enough to have tasks for everyone, and I know what a drag it is for volunteers to stand around with nothing to do. But part of my frustration with mission trips has to do with my understanding of the Holy Trinity.

Let me explain. Samuel Wells, a theologian from Duke University and a priest currently working in England, writes about a new framework for understanding Christian service.

He's not interested in what Christians want to do or think they should do, or even actually do for the poor.



He's interested what he calls, shamelessly, the most important word in the Bible.

It's sort of like a theological party game. What's the most important word in the Bible? Jesus? Love? Mission? God? Sin? Mercy? What do *you* think?

Samuel Wells—and here is where I think the Holy Trinity comes in—says the most important word in the Bible is . . . *with*. It's a trick question, but I have to agree: The most important word in the Bible is *with*.

The Trinity is, at heart, about *with*: about what Christians call *perichoresis*. This is the dance in which Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are one being, existing through their mutual relationship. And God is always gathering all humanity into that undivided relationship, bringing us all into life with God.

Remember, at the beginning of John's gospel: "The Word was with God." And Proverbs: "When God fixed the foundations of the earth ... I was there, ever at play in God's presence, delighting to be with the children of humanity." In other words, before time began, before anything else, there was a *with*. And until the end of time, there is a *with*, as Jesus promises: behold, I am with you always. *With* is the most fundamental thing about God.

*With*. And so we open our worship saying: the Lord be *with* you. We proclaim that the Word made flesh came to dwell *with* us. We call his name Emmanuel, meaning: God *with* us. We bless our gatherings saying: the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be *with* us all.

Notice: *with*, not *for*.

Because God is not actually *for* us: except in my crazy, private triumphalist fantasies in which God, who takes my side always, will magically appear and smash my enemies. God is not doing nice things *for* us, like strangers on mission trips who appear, hand out random goodies, and go home. God is not *for* us in the sense that God is always going to be giving us exactly

what we want, protecting us from illness and harm, and making us rich.

God is just *with* us. God sticks with us. Accompanies us. Delights in us, plays with us, suffers and abides with us. In trouble and in doubt, when everything goes perfectly and when things fall apart: God is with us.

### In relationship

Trinitarian theology has a reputation for being difficult. But I think the real challenge isn't intellectual or doctrinal—"Oh, it's so complicated, how can three be one?" That's sort of like saying how can I possibly be Sara who's Katie's mother and Sara who's Sylvia's colleague and Sara who's Roberto's neighbor? Am I three separate persons, three Saras? No, of course not: I'm just one, existing with different people. All my relationships inform each other—who I am as Sylvia's colleague affects and is affected by my relationships with my neighbors and family—but I'm actually not three separate persons.

And the Trinity is not three separate beings: God only exists in relationship. With God's self and with us. That's the challenge. Because this understanding of the Holy Trinity, if we model ourselves on it, changes everything. Our lives as Christians must mean being with others the way God is with us. *With*, not *for*.

Doing *for*, as mission groups and lovers and parents know, is super-tempting: It's easier and often feels safer than being fully *with*. Let me act on your behalf, doing something for you as if my being were somehow separate from yours. Let me hand you a sandwich at a sanctified distance. Let me solve your homework problems without getting entangled in your other problems. Let me send you some flowers to apologize when I've been snappish, without having a real conversation.

Being *with* is riskier. If I wait and listen and show you what I'm really like, my life becomes implicated in yours: We are no longer separate. And I might get changed by our relationship.



## Being present

Recently, I was at home working on a deadline. It was a beautiful warm day, and all the windows were open, and I was trying to focus on my writing and not get distracted. And then from the street I heard someone loudly wailing: "Help, help, help, help . . ." I looked out the window but couldn't see anything. I waited, thinking that maybe a neighbor, or a teacher from the school across the street would respond. The wailing continued. "Help, help, help."

"Oh, man," I thought. "I bet it's just that drunk lady who hangs out on the corner, but I guess I should go down and make sure everything's OK."

It *was* that drunk lady on the corner . . . a puffy, bruised, middle-aged woman who bounces back and forth between the street and the hospital and the county jail without ever getting sober; who mostly either sits on the sidewalk and moans, lies on the sidewalk in a stupor, or passes out.

I'd talked with her a few times before when she was a little more alert and had been able to walk down the block. Once she wanted to chat about the baby she was expecting—this was a total fantasy, as far as I could see—and it occurred to me that she might be really demented or mentally ill, as well as suffering from alcohol poisoning.

But now she wasn't talking. She was just moaning. "Help, help, help." I asked if she wanted me to call an ambulance for her. No, the drunk lady said. Did she want me to get food for her? No, she said. Then she started wailing again—not even "help," this time, just moaning. "Wo, wo, wo, wo." She was crying. She was impossible. I couldn't do a darn thing for her. And so I just sat down with her while she wailed. I think I said something stupid like, "I'm sorry you feel so bad."

After a while she stopped, and closed her eyes, and we sat there some more. I got up to go home, and crossed the street, and she started crying again, and a neighbor came out of her house and addressed me.

"This is very upsetting," she said, crossly. "I have little kids, and I don't want them to hear this. Can't we call someone to take her somewhere?"

"No," I said, "I don't think so."

The neighbor introduced herself to me, and she said again how messed-up and upsetting this was, and I agreed, and we talked together as she walked with me back to my front steps.

## Abiding with others

Sometimes there is nothing to do for anyone. I hate that. I can't tell you how much I want to make things better by doing something *for* people, and how little, it turns out, I want to just be *with* them. Because if I have to be with them—well, then if someone is drunk and crying, and she just wants another person to be with her in her unhappiness, then I have to sit there. Or if she's upset and worried about her kids, and she just wants another person to be with her in her anxiety, then I have to stand there and let her see how useless I am. I'm scared about not doing the right thing, and I have to let my own weakness and neediness show.

Being *with* people means I can't leave messages for them on their phones at a time I conveniently know they won't be there. I can't do good deeds for them and go home. In fact I can't do anything *for* them: I have to abide *with* them and allow them to abide with me.

The most important word in the Bible is the most important word in our lives: And it is a word made of flesh. God lives with us, just as Jesus lives with the Father, and we with one another, and the Holy Spirit, the very breath of life, lives with us all. ☞

**Sara Miles**, founder and director of The Food Pantry, serves as director of ministry at St. Gregory of Nyssa Episcopal Church in San Francisco. Her books include *Jesus Freak: Feeding Healing Raising the Dead* and *Take This Bread: A Radical Conversion*. She speaks, preaches, and leads workshops around the country, and her writing has appeared in *The New York Times Magazine*, *The New Yorker*, and on National Public Radio.





LET US PRAY

## Kindness as Prayer

by Julie K. Aageson

### As I write this month's

column—a reflection on the letter K: kindness as prayer—it is my birthday, and I've spent the afternoon reading more than 100 birthday notes—little visits from friends and family who kindly have remembered the day of my birth. It's one of the benefits of social media: up pops the name of someone you know reminding you of their birthday and you send a quick note, a warm wish. Such kindness. Such generosity.

Kindness as prayer, a spiritual practice? Absolutely! All of us can recall special acts of kindness (a word, a welcome, a touch) that convey generosity and largesse. The word kindness itself comes from the Latin root, *genere*. It means *to beget*. Kindness is about generativity, begetting. Kindness begets life. It is life giving and life enriching, a spiritual practice and an act of affirmation. Kindness bestows grace and care and love. And it's another of the definitions of prayer.

I will never forget a bus ride one summer day, in a packed full red double-decker bus up Banbury Road to our tiny little flat in Oxford, England. We'd been there a year. I was lonesome for home and carrying a load of groceries in my stuffed canvas bags, on my way to fetch our two young daughters at the close of the school day. An old woman sat behind me in the crowded bus and in her lap were two small cartons of strawberries. She tapped me on the shoulder and handed me one of the cartons, clearly offering a gift, clearly showing extraordinary kindness. She was a stranger but I

took it, thanked her profusely and got off at my stop with a lighter step, a sense of gratitude. Those years in England were marked by such acts.

When we were growing up and somehow began criticizing someone's behavior or attitude, my father often would say, "Be kind. You never know what battles another person may be fighting." For all of us who become judgmental or too quickly criticize, a word of grace is in order. We are the undeserving recipients of God's overwhelming grace. We are the bearers of resurrected life—new life, the freeing good news of God's love, forgiveness, generativity. Because we bear Christ to one another, we are the begetters of kindness.

It goes without saying that Christians don't have a corner on kindness. And I hope that in reflecting on kindness as prayer our lives will shine with the luminosity of kindness—not for sake of kindness itself although that is worthy too. But because we reflect the love of Christ.

With each birthday note today, I am reminded of a relationship important to my life. I picture faces and shared experiences. I hear the sound of their voices and delight in their affection. I've been showered with prayers of love and affection—kindness as prayer. 🌸

**Julie K. Aageson** is co-author of *One Hope: Remembering the Body of Christ* (Liturgical Press/Augsburg Fortress) which honors the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. The essays in *One Hope* are the product of a collaborative process by six gifted scholars and pastoral leaders, three Lutheran and three Catholic.



# M

## any of us come to the question of giving with baggage, sometimes helpful, sometimes not.

We have seen both negative and positive giving models in people who surround us. We have lived through tough financial surprises and pleasant ones. Our experiences inform us and shape our behavior. Our challenge is to *respond* to the invitation to live generously, not *react* to it.

When you tithe, you make a decision about how much you plan to give, and it usually depends on your income. Some of us think of a tithe as 10 percent of our salaries, and others consider a different proportion appropriate. The tithe has been incorporated into our Christian piety, though most New Testament references to it are about the dangers of tithing to show off, rather than giving out of gratitude.

Many people believe tithing is unachievable, unrealistic, and demanding. Some have been in faith cultures that require a tithe as a cost of belonging. Some feel money talk in church is out of place, adopting the injunctions about refusing to talk about how much they make, and, in turn, how much they give. Our cultural taboos lead the way, but our faith traditions also promote this behavior.

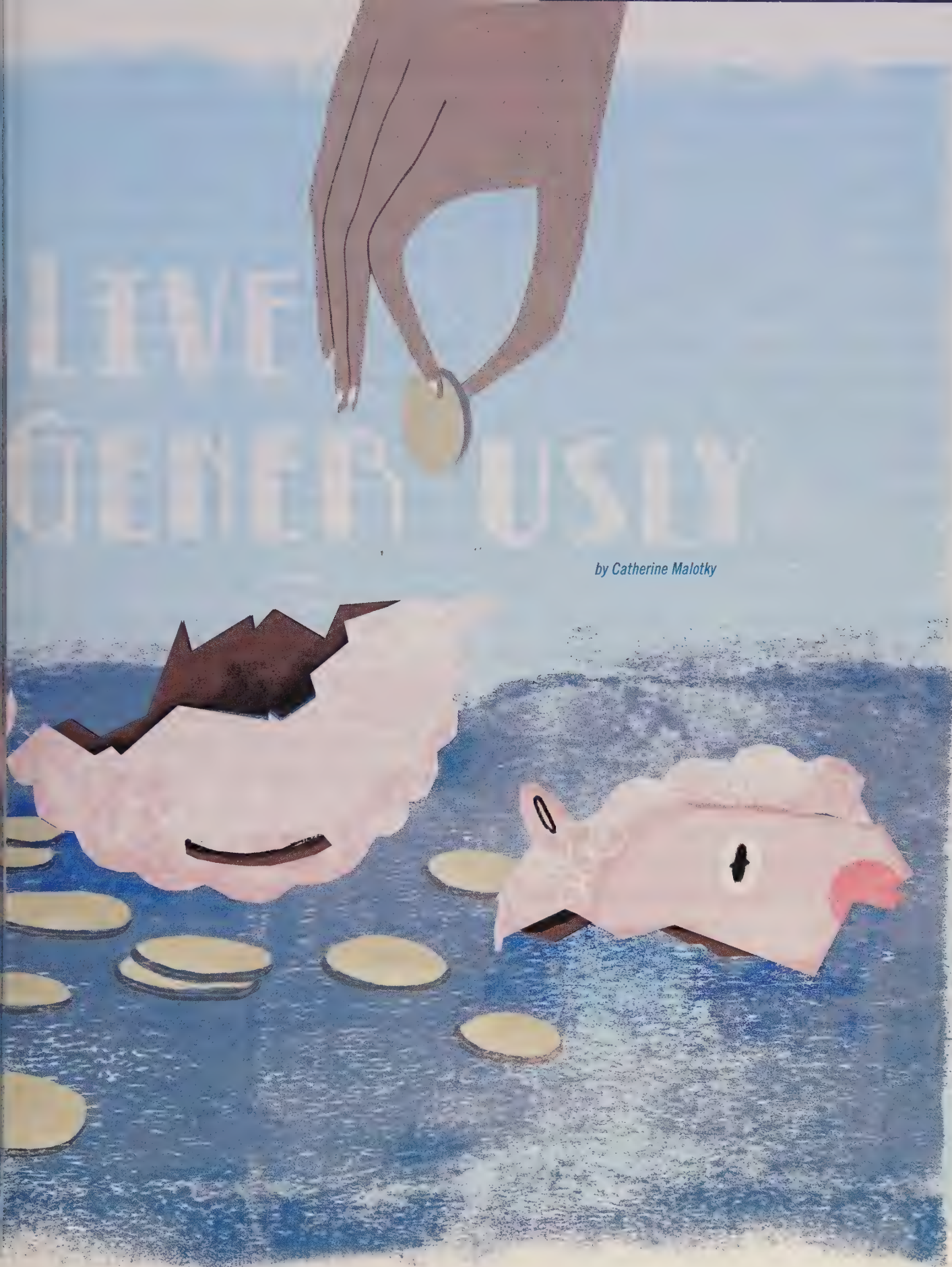
And no wonder. Think about the awkwardness of knowing you are much better or much worse off financially than a friend, relative, or neighbor (remember Luther's notion that anyone is a neighbor). What are our obligations if we have more? And how do we manage our dependence if we have less? This is complicated emotional territory and difficult to think through from a socio-economic point of view. Is dramatic wealth disparity good for our society or not?

### History of tithing

Let's look at the history of tithing, and, by extension, the offering. In the days before the IRS, tithing was a







*by Catherine Malotky*



a form of taxation. It was common in the cultures of the ancient Near East, and it was not all about money. In fact, before money was the common currency of exchange, people were required to tithe from their flocks and fields. It was a way to keep the empire going, to fund the services provided by the government. In some ways, the tithe was more humane than the tributes that were required of conquered people and/or citizens. Tributes were often flat amounts, which would unduly burden those who had little. At least a tithe was based on a proportion.

The tithe was not originally a part of the offering system that came to shape the covenant between God and God's chosen people. Much of Leviticus unpacks the sacrificial system of offerings that, when followed, represented some chance of being considered righteous. There were lists of offering types and the circumstances in which they were required. (Given the nature and context of Leviticus, there are some scholars who believe this system came late in Israel's history, preserved in Leviticus in an attempt to help the people of Israel reclaim their covenant identity.)

Remember Jesus' parents offering "a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, 'a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons'" as a part of the rite of purification after Jesus' birth (Luke 2:22-24)? In Leviticus 12, we learn that the required sacrifice for this rite was a young lamb for a burnt offering and a pigeon or turtle dove for a sin offering. If this was too much, a pair of either type of birds would suffice for both the burnt and sin offering. After following this rite, Mary would have been considered clean after childbirth and could rejoin the worshiping community. The sin offering was to atone for a sin committed unintentionally. The burnt offering became a part of the daily offerings made to God on behalf of the community.

### **In relationship with God**

This is different from the way we think of offerings

today. We do not operate under a formal sacrificial system, though there are some remnants of it in our faith traditions. How many of us have labored under a perceived expectation that we should give enough to be considered worthy of God's favor?

In some explanations, Jesus' death has been interpreted from this vantage point. Jesus was the lamb who once sacrificed, made atonement with God for our sins. We learn about what Jesus' death and resurrection accomplishes in other ways, but this one is common in our tradition.

For the people of Israel, the tithe became more than just an obligation to the governing structures of their societies. It became a part of what it meant to be in relationship with God. Note that at Bethel, Jacob's commitment to God included a tithe of what he would receive from the land God had promised to him and to his descendants (Genesis 28:20-22).

This is a different kind of "offering," outside of both the sacrificial system of the temple and the taxation system of the government. This was a gift of gratitude in response to God's generosity and was relational. In Deuteronomy 14:22-29, the people are instructed to eat their tithe in the presence of God so they might learn to "fear the LORD your God always." Imagine consuming a tenth of the year's harvest in a matter of hours or days. That would require quite a trust in God's providence in the next growing year.

Every third year was different, with instructions to store the tithes that year for the sake of those who didn't have anything to tithe. Those included Levites who were priests but not land owners, and resident aliens, widows, and orphans, none of whom had formal access to the economic system.

### **Where we are now**

Tithing was eventually adopted by the Western Christian church. By the sixth century, it was a part of ecclesiastical law; by the eighth century, tithing was enforced



in Europe by civil law. After the Reformation, tithes continued to be imposed and began again to resemble the model of taxation.

Requiring tithes was ultimately abandoned in Europe (as late as 1936 in England). In Germany today, a portion of personal income tax is distributed to churches according to the taxpayer's religious affiliation. In the United States, tithing was never a part of the law, though some churches certainly rely on it. Interestingly, the Eastern Orthodox churches never accepted tithing as a required donation.

So where are we now? Giving as a measure of our faithfulness—either by rejecting the idea or by embracing it—is a piece of baggage we carry into our financial decision making. First-fruits giving assumes that we make a decision about how much to give first, and then build a financial life around it.

In some ways, first-fruits giving reflects the infrastructure of the tithe—it's a bill to pay first to one who is owed. However, defining first-fruits giving as *voluntary* seems a better way to frame the nature of the gift. It's not a tribute owed, but a gift given. It is not demanded, but offered. We desire a close relationship with God, and we choose spiritual disciplines like tithing to demonstrate our love for God.

### Place of grace

The truth is we cannot buy God's favor. It is already ours. We cannot tithe our way into a seat at the heavenly banquet, a place has already been set for us. From that place of grace, we can open our eyes to the abundance around us, and, in thanks, share the wealth, whether it's money, wisdom, or compassion.

When I talk about tithing as a spiritual discipline, I often hear protest that 10 percent is unattainable; however, I believe that it is. Our priorities might have created a financial life that crowds out giving. We have plenty to buy, including things we really need, and that can overwhelm us.

One of the beauties of tithing is that it requires us to ask the question, "How much do I need?" If I choose to give away 10 percent of my income (or more!), what kind of adjustments must I make to my day-to-day spending plan to make this possible? It goes beyond cutting out the expensive daily coffee. It might mean fewer clothing purchases, living with that old TV a while longer, or not retiring as early. For some, meeting a goal to tithe will mean way-of-life adjustments.

Many of us who have traveled to countries with less material wealth have experienced a profound and humbling hospitality from their people. Those who have little often lavish much. Perhaps they trust in God's provision. Perhaps they trust their community as well as God for support. Perhaps they define wealth in different ways than we do.

It is possible to give too much. In our economic system, giving to the point of being dependent on others is not a gift to the creation God calls us to steward. We need to ask the question, "How much do I need?" and answer it realistically after some soul searching and math. Not all of us bring in paychecks on a regular basis. How do we determine what constitutes our income so that we might calculate our tithe?

This is tricky. Do you choose to tithe by what you make or what you put in the bank after deductions? Do you count gifts to family as part of the tithe or not? Is wealth different than income? How much should go to the congregation or church body? How much to worthy secular causes? We know the church is no longer the only provider of services to those in need.

Struggling to decide? Choose *something*. Lean into the discipline of giving and see what happens to your heart and to your awareness of God at work in the world. You will be changed! ☸

**The Rev. Catherine Malotky**, an ELCA pastor, serves at Luther Seminary as a philanthropic adviser. She has served as a parish pastor, editor, teacher, and retreat leader. She writes the "Amen" column as a prayer that closes each issue of *Gather*.





## FAMILY MATTERS

# Confirming our Youth

by Elyse Nelson Winger

“... so before all beginning, and I want to beg you, as much as I can . . . be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves like locked rooms and like books that are written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek answers, which cannot be given to you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without even noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.” —Rainer Maria Rilke in *Letters to a Young Poet*

## The dress was Gunne

Sax by Jessica McClintock, a tea-length pale pink satin, v-shape waisted, lacey overlay wonder with puffed-up sleeves. The cake was Grasshopper by Woullet Bakery, a confection of chocolate and minty layers covered in whipped cream frosting. The occasion was confirmation by Calvary Lutheran, a Pentecost celebration for Elyse, Shelley, and Roxanne, three eighth-grade girls affirming their baptisms in rented white robes and red carnation corsages.

Pictures from that June morning attest to the late-1980s aesthetics, and pages from the *Lutheran Book of Worship* detail the shape of the rite, but most of what I remember from that day is the cake and the dress, both first-time splurges and testaments to the significance of this event in my family. When it came to my con-

firmation experience, including Wednesday afternoon classes with our pastor, everything felt indeed right and salutary. I didn't (yet) question the truth of the creed; I didn't (yet) hesitate to believe. I knew confirmation was a sacred rite of passage into the one place I could soon claim adulthood: the church. I wasn't sure what adulthood really meant. But I knew it meant new rights and responsibilities at church. And *that* meant a lot. Over time, though, the meaning and effect of confirmation has changed.

On a Sunday last November, a little mouse decided to make its home in the Thanksgiving display surrounding our church pulpit. My daughter, Catherine, in blue acolyte's robe, twitched in her chancel pew, half-singing, eyes darting as the mouse made its escape from the silken fall foliage to the sacristy. It made for an amusing opening hymn and a good excuse for our pastor's re-telling of a familiar joke, which goes something like this: There was a Jewish rabbi and a Lutheran pastor who were good friends and would meet regularly to talk about life in their congregations. One morning the rabbi lamented to the pastor about mice in the synagogue. Did the pastor have any advice? And the pastor said, “Yes! We've found just the trick. We confirm the mice. Then we know that they'll never come back again.” The congregation chuckled, Catherine kept vigil, and I sighed.

You see, a special-order cake and new dress are on the horizon in our family. For this Pentecost season, Catherine will



affirm her baptism with five of her confirmation classmates, rented robes and all. But this time is different. Now I am the parent, eagerly anticipating this singular event in our family's life together and yet powerfully aware that Catherine brings to this milestone quite different concerns and convictions than the 13-year-old me. And her questions and doubts are inviting (okay, forcing) me to look anew at the meaning of confirmation. Among every confirmation class across every church there are young people at different stages of belief and faith, and all of them deserve the opportunity to affirm their baptisms with authenticity and integrity. What does this mean?

For me, this means shifting the focus. Instead of exclusively emphasizing confirmation as a young person's *yes* to God and the church, confirmation should, first and foremost, be the church's *yes* to our young people, and a celebratory affirmation of God's grace in their lives. Catherine is very interested in what's really "true" and she doesn't know how she can say *yes*, in her own terms, to the promises her father and I made at baptism when she's not sure she's all in. And that's okay. What she—and all young people—deserve to know is that church can be a place of genuine belonging for them where they can bring their whole, complicated,

independent, not-yet-formed selves.

Confirmation, then, becomes a celebration of the church's commitment to walking with and supporting these young people through their high school years; offering them opportunities for leadership, creativity, and service; providing them sound intellectual and theological resources for Bible study and moral reasoning; giving them space to rage against the machine that *can* be the church; ...and to question everything. If we as churches can do that, I don't think that the joke about church mice will ring so sadly true.

I love the work of Rainer Maria Rilke in *Letters to a Young Poet* and the way he invites a young soul to live *and* love the questions of life, worrying not about the answers but trusting that one day, they will come. And now that I am parenting young people myself, I want them to know that living and loving the questions of faith is an authentic way to live out those baptismal promises their parents first made. Confirmation is about saying *yes* to the journey, *yes* to the good and challenging work that the church calls us each to do

in the world, and *yes* to showing up to hearing, considering, and experiencing the grace and love of God alive in the means of grace, in friendships, and in one's own life.

This Pentecost, the dress will not be Gunne Sax and the cake will not be Grasshopper. But the occasion will be confirmation, this time by Our Saviour Lutheran, where I will give thanks for the diverse, unique,



and authentic beliefs, convictions and questions of our young people and where I will give thanks to God for amazing, mysterious, transforming grace at work in their lives now and for every year to come. 🌿

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# Stretching the Broth

by Twila Schock



"We're so glad you've finally arrived," said Olga. "We've only got enough money to feed the grandmothers for three more weeks."

It was September 1997, and we had just hired the driver of a beaten up Lada Zhiguli to transport us from Moscow's Sheremetyova Airport to our new missionary quarters.

We had come to serve as pastors of the Moscow Protestant Chaplaincy, an international congregation known worldwide for its extensive soup kitchen ministry. Founded in 1991, the soup kitchen ministry was daily serving 800 *babushky*, Russian grandmothers, whose monthly pensions—in earlier days, enough to provide for housing, basic needs, and an annual vacation—would scarcely pay for a loaf of bread in post-Soviet Russia.

"We've only got enough money to feed the grandmothers for three more weeks." These sobering words quickly disabused me of any notions that this was going to be the glamorous missionary assignment that many thought a posting in Moscow might be.

"What will they eat if we run out of money?" I asked.

"Some of them may have some root vegetables from their gardens," answered Olga. "But that's not enough to get them through the winter. Some can get help from their families. But, since the change in government, there's no longer much to share."

"So, where does the money come from?" I pressed.

"That's why we're glad you're here," smiled Olga.

## Stretching the broth

Up until that time, I'd been a rather individualistic, do-it-yourself person who strongly adhered to the old adage, "Too many hands spoil the broth." But, in that short trip from the airport to my new home, I was no longer worried about spoiling the broth. Somehow we needed to *stretch* the broth.

And, with regard to having "too many hands," I quickly became a devotee of a new adage: All hands on deck!

But how were we to do it? The Internet and email were a relatively new phenomenon at the time; none in my family had it yet. Mail service, if it worked at all, was painfully slow. A mailed plea for assistance could easily take two to three weeks to arrive in the United States. By then, our coffers would be depleted. Telephoning worked only marginally and a nine-hour time zone difference only made things worse.

Stretching the broth, I quickly learned, was going to be an onerous task—and we weren't going to do it alone. It was time to make stone soup.

Indeed, the legend of stone soup needed to become our model for ministry if we were going to keep this ministry—and these grandmothers—alive. Our grandmothers' soup was going to take a village to prepare. One thing was certain: Time was of the essence.

And, so we set out with our empty pot, water and stone. We gathered whatever kindling wood we could.



*"Once upon a time, some travelers came to a village, carrying nothing more than an empty cooking pot. Upon their arrival, the villagers were not able to share any food with the hungry travelers. The travelers then went to a stream and filled the pot with water, dropped a large stone in it, and placed it over a fire. One of the villagers became*

*curious and asked what they were doing. The travelers answered that they were making 'stone soup' which tasted wonderful, although it still needed a little bit of garnish to improve the flavor, which they were missing. The villager did not mind parting with a few carrots to help them out, so that was added to the soup. Another villager walked by, inquiring*

*about the pot, and the travelers again mentioned their stone soup which had not reached its full potential yet. The villager handed them a little bit of seasoning to help them. More villagers walked by, each adding another ingredient. Finally, a delicious and nourishing pot of soup was enjoyed by all."*  
(Wikipedia, "stone soup.")

and we prayed for the villagers to appear with whatever meager ingredients they had.

### **Making the soup base**

One of the things that one learns in international ministry is that divisions that exist "back home" in the United States often become immaterial. In fact, often—because we're no longer "back home"—the most unusual alliances are forged.

This particular ministry was no exception. While, as a pastor in the United States, I had become accustomed to a sharp distinction between church and state, in this particular ministry the exact opposite was true. The Moscow Protestant Chaplaincy was, at the time, under the umbrella of the United States embassy. In fact, thanks to a decades-earlier agreement between President Franklin Roosevelt and Foreign Affairs Commissar Maxim Litvinov, it was the United States military that provided the base for our ministry to be there.

This relationship was to be both respected and leveraged for, without it, the Russian religious and political environment would surely mandate that the ministry be shut down.

While the U.S. military was not in a position to support our soup kitchen financially, it did allow us access to individuals in the diplomatic community who might respond with open hearts. And they did so generously. It was some of these very people who extended

our ministry from "three more weeks" to "three more months."

Another unlikely ingredient in our stone soup base was a large group of African refugees who were stranded in Moscow after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Coming to Moscow from Ethiopia, Liberia, Cameroon, and elsewhere, they were seeking either education or asylum. And while many may have come from families of privilege in Africa, these same people were not in a position to provide financial support for this ministry.

In fact, some cynical onlookers said that the needs of these African sojourners in our midst put additional strain on our ministry and resources.

On the contrary!

To be sure, they required our assistance as well; however, the wonderful gifts they brought could not be quantified in dollars. They brought hands willing to serve, modeled deep faith in the greatest adversity, were not daunted by the scarcity that we all faced and lavished all of us with warmth—taking the edge off of the cold Moscow winter. Unable to find employment in Russia, they would, in exchange for volunteering to serve the grandmothers their lunch, receive meals as well. They became the primary work force in our struggling kitchens.

"I never ever imagined," said 85-year-old Irena, a retired Russian professor of chemistry, "that one day I would find myself eating in a soup kitchen. Further-



more, being served by refugees from Cameroon! This whole scene is all very shameful for us, you know. We Russians are very proud. But, you know, it's also a bit nice—like the United Nations. And, we all need each other. It's good that I learned this before I die."

### Adding spices

Of course, in post-Soviet Russia, soup kitchens were popping up everywhere. Some were set up by secular non-profit organizations and others by foreign government aid programs.

What was the seasoning which made the Moscow Protestant Chaplaincy's soup unique?

It was a ministry that found its origins at the foot of the cross. It was an informal coalition of churches who set aside denominational differences and joined hands as, together, we found ourselves serving in a context that could be quite hostile to outside religious influence.

Our very presence was a symbol of this Christian alliance. There as missionaries, we were sponsored by ELCA Missionary Sponsorship. But, alongside that, four partner denominations buttressed that support as well, as the Presbyterian Church USA, the Reformed Church in America, the United Methodist Church, and the American Baptist Churches joined hands and resources to do more together than any single denomination could have done alone.

And the denominational lines did not end there! The Moscow Protestant Chaplaincy was composed of people from more than 20 nations and 25 denominations. There were Roman Catholics. There were Copts. There were Monophysites (look that one up!). There were Orthodox, Pentecostals, Unitarians, and more.

Eric, our congregation council president, considered our diversity one day and laughed. "Twila, you do know that I never dreamed I would chair a congregation with someone like you as the pastor." I nodded and laughed in agreement.

What he meant was this: Eric, in the United States, was an active member of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, a denomination which does not support the ordination of women.

"It's true, Eric, isn't it?! For some reason, in Moscow, in this time, our differences no longer divide," I could reply. "When Christians join hands to serve as Christ calls us, those differences evaporate." He agreed.

All spices imaginable soon were added to the pot and the broth became tasty and rich. The broth also became abundant as Christians from around the world brought what seasoning they could to our humble stone soup. . . . United States dollars, sweat labor, Swiss francs, Slovak koruna, 200 bags of buckwheat. One Russian grocer donated a truckload of butter!

A ministry for 800 *babushky* with "only three weeks" to survive grew three years later to a ministry for 1,500 *babushky*.

### "May I have your recipe?"

Much has changed in Russia since those early post-Soviet days. Economic strength has increased; poverty has decreased. While the ministry of the Moscow Protestant Chaplaincy remains, it has adapted to the new context in which it finds itself. A new type of soup is simmering there.

And what about those of us who lived and toiled there in Moscow's lean times? Most of us have moved on from those humble kitchens. But we left with a mighty recipe.

The recipe is quite simple. No one person is the keeper of the ingredients. Each brings their own seasoning to the pot. The Holy Spirit fires the kindling. And, too many hands—when joined in the name of Christ—can never spoil the broth! 🌿

**The Rev. Twila Schock** serves as senior pastor at Christ Lutheran Church in Belvidere, Ill. She spent 18 years working in ELCA Global Mission, serving as a missionary in Slovakia, Germany, and Russia, and as director for missionary sponsorship and global gifts.





# BECAUSE WE LOVE

*by Barbara Berry-Bailey*

Who doesn't like giving and receiving gifts? Aside from the fairly recent use of gift cards, people have spent considerable time and physical and mental energy selecting and presenting birthday gifts, wedding gifts, graduation gifts, and even just-because-I-love-you gifts.

Though not explicitly mentioned in the George Wyle song, "The Most Wonderful Time of the Year," gifts are an integral part of the Christmas tradition, both secular and religious. Theologically sound sermons proclaim God's gift of the Christ child to humanity. You have the option to give or not to give a gift. God could

have chosen another way to redeem humanity. How? I can't imagine. That would be up to the Almighty, but God had the option not to give us Christ.

So it goes with a gift. You are not obligated to give a gift. Yes, the expectation might be there; hence the department store registry. But we are not commanded to do so, regardless of what etiquette columnists might think.

Having worked in development for public radio and television stations, I know of what I speak. The now regular on-air fundraisers encourage, seduce, and entice listeners and viewers to "do your part" because,



honestly, they are not obligated. However, it is not the same in the Judeo-Christian community. Support of the community of faith is not simply an expectation or even an obligation. I believe it is the law.

### The law

For many Christians, the extent of knowledge of “the law” is the Ten Commandments. Regardless of which book you check—Exodus or Deuteronomy—or how you count them, not one of them deals explicitly with financial support of the community. Consequently, we do not feel we have violated any “laws” when we withhold financial support from our congregation.

Murder, adultery, stealing, even lying (though we think it not as scandalous as the others) are certain to cause us anxiety, guilt, and shame because we are taught these are bad behaviors. However, not all of us learn that we should put tithe into our budgets before mortgages, groceries, car payments, or tuition.

The Ten Commandments is not the entirety of the law given to God’s people. And do not seek premature solace in Paul’s words “you are not under law” (Romans 6:14). We readily accept and teach “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18). In addition to the Decalogue (Ten Commandments), the Old Testament offers several ordinances and statutes as part of the covenant God established for taking care of the community.

In Leviticus and Numbers, the statute required that one-tenth of produce, flocks, and cattle be given to support priests. And priests gave one-tenth of that to support the high priest. Writers of Deuteronomy mention an additional one-tenth to be collected on a triennial basis to meet the needs of foreigners, orphans and widows, and festival purposes. Additionally, there is what I call “the imperative handout” to individuals in need. You can liken it to handouts to people asking for donations at traffic stops or on busy city streets.

“If there is a poor man among your brothers in any of the towns of the land that the LORD your God is giv-

ing you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward your poor brother. Rather be openhanded and freely lend him whatever he needs” (Deuteronomy 15:7–8, New International Version).

### The pain of changing

The New Testament does not specify a percentage. Rather it emphasizes that since all is from God, we return with joy and thanksgiving what God has first given to us.

If you are still with me and have not flipped through to another article that is not so law-laden, my point is not to browbeat you with giving edicts. Rather, it is to understand why many of us hesitate to give away what we have obtained.

Psychologist and motivational speaker Henry Cloud says, “We change our behavior when the pain of staying the same becomes greater than the pain of changing. Consequences give us the pain that motivates us to change.”

The Job-like experience of losing everything I owned rather than the “pain of staying” provided me with a different perspective on giving.

Decades ago, I was relocating for a new job. With the help of friends, I packed everything I owned into a 22-foot self-move truck and drove 60 miles to my new home. It was winter, and I arrived late in the evening to a freezing cold house. It seemed the previous owners had shut off the heat, subsequently causing a water pipe to burst in the basement. A call to the management company the next day made me realize that my son and I would need to seek refuge for a while with an old college friend in town. I am still grateful for her compassion for our homeless situation.

For nearly a week that moving truck sat in front of her house until one day I received a phone call at work. “Barbara, did you move the truck?” she asked. I thought she was joking. Everything—clothes, furniture, housewares, appliances, my son’s baby pictures—every-



thing was in that truck.

"Why would I move the truck? I have no place else to go."

"Barbara," she sighed, "the truck is gone."

In that moment I don't know why I didn't cry or scream. For a reason I could not explain at the time, a calm washed over me because I knew, other than the lost baby pictures, everything could be replaced. Not everything immediately; it would take some time, of course, but it was just stuff.

All that memorization in Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod schools paid off. Psalm 46 was always my favorite and still is today. "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble." In that moment—though I was not literally homeless—all I owned was on my back and in my 1984 Chevy Cavalier. But I still had hope.

### Holy expectation

The Job-esque restoration of my belongings occurred after I reported the stolen truck to the police. We learned that a neighbor had reported it abandoned and the company had confiscated the truck. The contents were all there, and several days later I claimed everything, including the baby pictures.

I invite you to look at the things that own you, rather than vice versa. Responding to the call to commit financially is not about scarcity, but about seeing our abundance and rearranging our priorities. We should think more about what we need, rather than about what we want. Notice the next time you want something rather than needing it. Consider starting a fund into which you make cash deposits of your savings from not buying items you don't need. Watch how that fund grows and then direct those funds to charitable (loving) giving—your congregation, your women's group, your synod, or a specific ELCA ministry. It's a start.

Consider what your financial commitment to the church can do. It can support the clergy or domestic social ministry programs or your own congregational

festivals. It can work in places and in ways we can only dream about. When we honor the holy expectation to support the community, we can see and experience our connection with the church on earth.

In the United States of America, I suspect no one likes to be told what to do, not even children. (I once overheard my school-age grandchild command a friend, "Don't tell me what to do!") But when we pray "thy will be done," we must understand that God's will is done through human agents.

When we pray "give us this day our daily bread," we must also pray that for those who are hungry. From those who have received much, much is required. Our dollars contribute to bread for those who have none. Even people who have little have treasures to offer for the wholeness of the community.

As my mom used to say (and probably your mom as well), "The proof of the pudding is in the eating."

This expression of thanks from a ministry supported by the ELCA churchwide staff during the holiday season says it all:

*Thank you so much [to] the entire Lutheran Center staff for your generous support of our Compassion Closet. Because of your generosity, someone in need will have [clothes] to wear when they leave Advocate Condell Medical Center. Even though we have not unpacked all we have received, just now I learned, yesterday our staff distributed clothing to someone in need. You made the difference in a stranger's life!*

My prayer is that one day we can make those words of Henry Cloud untrue—that we who are the church do not have to experience personal pain to understand the importance of supporting the church. We will do it not because we are supposed to, but because we love and we want to. 🌿

**The Rev. Barbara Berry-Bailey** is the manager of companion education in ELCA Global Mission.





*by Karen Melang*

## **PRAYER, FASTING, AND GIVING ALMS.**

This trio of actions might be familiar to you. Jesus holds up all three of these practices in his Sermon on the Mount found at the beginning of Matthew 6.



**GIVE** alms, pray, and fast, Jesus tells us there, but beware of your motivations. If you do these things so that others will think you are a good person—and that’s what happens—you will have gotten exactly what you hoped for. But the good opinion of others, no matter how enjoyable that might be, is not the best part of giving alms, praying, and fasting. Your Father in heaven wants to give you so much more.

These readings from Matthew 6 are the gospel lesson for Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent. Over the centuries, prayer, fasting, and giving alms have come to be called the disciplines of Lent. Some of us make a stab at doing some of them more, let’s just say, *religiously* during Lent than we do the rest of the year. We give up chocolate or wine or television for Lent or miss some meals and give what we’ve saved to Lutheran World Relief or Women of the ELCA.

These are all excellent practices, but why are we talking about them in Pentecost? Isn’t Lent long gone?

So it is. But might not the practices and disciplines of Lent be good for our souls year-round? Perhaps the long, green days of Pentecost are the perfect time to consider those practices that open us to the presence and power of God in our lives.

Take, for instance, fasting, even a tiny bit of fasting. An intentionally missed meal, whatever time of the year, can remind us that God is not a bystander in our lives, but the creator of the huge network of nature and people that brings us our food. Missing lunch can remind us, too, that others in the world are starving, and that in some small way, at least, we can do something about it.

## FAITH PRACTICES

These days there is a lot of talk in Christian circles about a variety of faith practices. Don’t let the words

“faith practices” throw you if you haven’t heard them used together before. They are just a new name for what Christians have been doing since the beginning: praying, studying, worshiping, inviting, giving, encouraging, fasting, teaching, offering hospitality, serving, doing acts of mercy, forgiving, healing, living in community, and striving for peace and justice.

There are more faith practices, of course. None of them are new, but naming them shines a light on them that helps us notice what they do. Faith practices deepen our life-long journey of grace and growth begun at baptism.

We need to remember, of course, that we don’t do faith practices to earn points with God. We don’t need points with God. One of the fundamental Lutheran contributions to the Christian conversation is that God loves us dearly for Christ’s sake, and that nothing we do or don’t do can change that. God does not need our faith practices, but we do, and so do our neighbors.

Faith practices can help us see where God’s powerful love is at work. They encourage us to notice God and to join God in action.

## GOD IN ACTION

I used to work for Habitat for Humanity. I met many poor and desperate people who came to ask about getting a Habitat house. They often had incredibly sad stories to tell. Knowing that Jesus comes to us in the poor (Matthew 25:34–36), I tried to look deeply into peoples’ faces and see Jesus there.

I did not always succeed in this, but whenever I did, it changed the character of the conversation I was having with the person before me. I was practicing noticing God in my neighbor. It made a big difference.

In the Bible study that begins with this issue of *Gather*, we will look together at the faith practice of



giving money. Giving money for God's work is an ancient practice we learned from our Jewish forebears. Giving a tithe, 10 percent, is the rule of thumb in the Old Testament.

Giving is a faith practice many of us grew up with. We watched our parents write a check and put it in an envelope to take to church. My mom had a "mite box" on her kitchen counter where she put coins for special projects her church women's group had taken on. We children got a dime every Sunday to put in the Sunday school offering. We grew up giving.

When my husband and I married, money was scarce. I'm sure we put something in the collection plate at church most Sundays. I imagine it was whatever we thought we could spare of what was in our pockets.

Now many years later, I realize that I've learned a lot about the faith practice of giving. Stewardship studies, special appeals, and real live examples of givers have taught me much. I also learned about giving from my job, raising money for Habitat. Here's some of what I've learned.

**Percentage giving is all it's cracked up to be.** A churchwide appeal years ago set my husband and me on the path to percentage giving. First, we determined what percent of our income we were currently giving. It turned out to be far less than we thought it was. This simple calculation became a wake-up call to our faith practice of giving.

Given our financial situation and responsibilities, we knew that tithing was completely out of the question. But could we give just 1 percent more? We decided we would try.

That decision made us think more carefully about our financial life in general. When we thought about what percent of our income we could give to our church, we began to understand that we were called to be faithful managers of 100 percent of what we had.

**Writing God's check first is a good idea.** Giving 1 percent more than before meant shifting some priorities. I figured out fast that writing our church check first, before other expenditures, was key.

That first check assured us that our commitment to our church was met. Even more importantly, writing that check was a monthly reminder that we could trust God's care for us. We came to understand that the percentage we did not give away was enough to meet all our needs.

These days lots of people give to their churches through automatic withdrawals. Setting up that system of giving is another way to give to God first.

**Growing is good.** At first we thought tithing was beyond us, and it was. But it was still on our minds. What if we could actually give away 10 percent of our income? As we took baby steps in our giving and as our income grew, we began to add 1 percent more to our giving bit by bit. Not every year, but many years, we were able to do just that. Eventually, we found ourselves tithing as we had hoped we could.

Along with tithing came a clearer sense of God's constant care and a better understanding of our financial life.

**Thousands of worthy causes and projects need support. Not every cause or project needs my support.** Countless organizations work to alleviate suffering, prevent violence, promote education and the arts, and care for creation. As we give to organizations like these, we are privileged to be able to join in God's compassionate care for the whole world.

But there are far too many outstanding causes for me to support them all. I've learned to do my research and to choose carefully what I support. (Lots of information, including tax returns, is available about nonprofits online at sites like [www.guidestar.org](http://www.guidestar.org).) Since I can't give to every worthwhile, well-run project



I've learned to support those causes that call my name and touch my heart the most. I remind myself not to feel guilty about what I can't support. Just as I can't do every job that needs doing, I can't give to every cause that needs support. That's OK. Different causes appeal to different givers.

Giving connects me to my place in the world and to faraway places. One of the things I love about Habitat for Humanity is that you actually get to see what you are supporting. What a thrill to drive by a house your gift helped to build! You can even work on a house if you want to. Giving to my congregation and hometown causes strengthens my ties to the people God has put around me.

Giving to people across the world connects me to those whose lives are very different, and usually much more difficult, than mine. When I help fund a well to provide clean drinking water halfway around the world, I get a better sense of what so many people in the world are up against. Turning on my faucet becomes a whole new experience for me, an experience that helps me gauge my responsibilities to God's children everywhere.

I trust that organizations I've vetted will use my gift where it is needed most, so I usually don't designate my gift to a specific use unless there is an appeal for something in particular. I know from working with nonprofits that occasionally someone wants to give money for something that is not needed or that cannot be dealt with easily. Especially if you are considering making a

large donation for something specific, check it out first. Be assured that if you ask, your inquiry and your gift will be kept anonymous.

When I worked for Habitat, I had a family come in and tell me they wanted to pay anonymously for the cost of construction of an entire house. Now there was a designated gift that was needed and wanted! Their generosity still overwhelms me.



I have learned the most about giving from surprising mentors. When I was in Cameroon years ago on a Woman to Woman WELCA exchange trip, I heard of a group of women who gave a banquet for the poorest people in their community. These women were very poor themselves by my standards, but they were eager to heed Jesus' suggestion (Luke 14:12-14) to give a banquet for the poor.

After much soul-searching and counting the cost, each of the women contributed 55 cents for the food for the banquet. It was a huge financial stretch for many of them. Their trust in God's care, their concern for their neighbors in need, and their eagerness to do God's work inspire me yet. I'm sure there is much more for me to learn about giving. I know that teaching me to trust God's care in everything is an ongoing project for God.

And I am grateful that over and over again, through faith practices like giving, I get to see God's presence and power, to practice trusting, and to join God in caring for my neighbors and God's world. 🌿

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"... I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me. . . . Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." Matthew 25:35-40



by Ian Brown



In the first session of the summer Bible study, "Give in Secret," author Emma Crossen said she believes Jesus thought it was important to interact with those who receive our gifts. "If our giving does not include interactions with those [we help], we may be missing something that was vital to Jesus' understanding of how people interact with God," she wrote.

Below are examples of how three ELCA congregations do just that—interact with the people they serve.

## At Trinity Lutheran Church, Kailua-Kona, Hawaii

Cindy Hill and other volunteers from her congregation, go on as many as three or four mission trips a month. Their destination—a place many consider a paradise on earth, but for some it's Paradise Lost.

Unlike many mission trips, these sojourns are not around the world, they are just around the corner from Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Kailua-Kona, Hawaii.

Kailua-Kona with its waterfalls, volcanoes, and soft black sands has a lot to offer visitors. Those travelers who walk the "Royal Footsteps" waterfront stretch of Alii Drive experience breathtaking sights. The people who live on the streets of Kailua-Kona are used to the beauty, and so, rarely seek it out.

The *State of Homelessness in America 2014* reports that Hawaii is ranked second among the 50 states for homeless population per capita. And homelessness is nothing new in Hawaii. In 1791, King Kamehameha I enacted the "law of the splintered paddle" (or in Hawaiian, *kanawai mamalahoe*) that states, "Let every elderly person, woman, and child lie by the roadside in safety."

A team of volunteers led by Cindy minister to the people who "lie by the roadside in safety"—or the homeless of the community. The volunteers are known as Holy Trinity's HERO (Help Everyone Regardless of Outcome) ministry, and they attempt to meet the basic needs of the homeless. That includes distributing to

them items such as food, water, first-aid kits, laundry kits, clothing, footwear, Bibles, and gift cards.

Jim, who is homeless, was Cindy's inspiration to serve. She remembers how one morning he was "pitching in" by cleaning up the beach before a breakfast for people who are homeless. He handed her a trash bag and they worked side-by-side bagging leaves.

"After the cleanup, I ate breakfast with Jim. That morning I received an unexpected lesson from the Lord about serving. And that's when I said to myself, 'If Jim Buban, a homeless alcoholic, can get up early and show his love for God, neighbor, and community by serving, then I can too.'"

Since working with the homeless ministry, Cindy thinks more about the sacrifices Jesus made. "I reflect more on the *living* examples he set for us to follow.

"My relationship with God has changed," she said. "Before working with this ministry, God seemed less personal, more distant, less present in my life. Now I feel much closer to God."

She said she feels as if God can "meet each of us where we are, and speak to us about what we need to hear" about God's word through the Holy Spirit.

"I am the Lord's servant. I try to serve the poor as if I'm serving the Lord, and I try to recognize the face of the Lord in those who are suffering," Cindy said.

She said her prayers include asking God to direct her according to God's will and purpose for her life.

"It has been my experience that both the person serving and the person being served can be changed forever," she said.





On the mainland, in urban Milwaukee, Cross Lutheran Church is at the center of its community.

Each Wednesday, Cross Church is a place where the unemployed, the homeless, and the working poor from the neighborhood can find a hot meal and break bread together. Weekly, 200 bags of food from the church's pantry are delivered to those living in poverty.

It is a place where employment specialists lead a job-training program. They deliver guidance, skill assessments, assistance with résumé writing, and interview coaching. The congregation's Bread of Healing Clinic provides free medical service. Medical supplies are contributed by pharmaceutical companies. Volunteer medical professionals donate their time and talent to the 3,600 people who visit the clinic each year.

"The people here at Cross are fantastic. First they treat you, then they pray with you," said one patient.

"Faith is at the very heart of the congregation and all of its ministries," says lead pastor, Michelle Y. Townsend de López, who was a member of the congregation for 30 years before she was called to ordained ministry.

"There is a powerful spirit working in this congregation," she said. "It is a strong spirit that moved me from a career as a paralegal and a human resources director to my call as an ordained servant of the Lord."

Pastor Michelle's profound journey began with a congregation's outreach to the community. This "wonderfully diverse congregation shaped and nurtured me for decades," she said. "I served in many lay leadership roles here at Cross before I heard the call that completely changed my life."

Pastor Michelle's ministry roles reached beyond the doors of the congregation. A decade ago, she served with the Lutheran Human Rights office in El

Salvador for nearly three years. "I witnessed first-hand devastating poverty; the scarcity of food, and no hope for tomorrow."

She believes that poverty and little hope are reasons kids from Central America risk their lives to come to the United States. Some are trying to get work to help family; some are trying to join family who came to the U.S. before increased border enforcement. Others are leaving because of violence.

A United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees report says that 58 percent of 400 youth the agency interviewed "had suffered, been threatened, or feared serious harm" that might merit international protection.

"Throughout its history," Pastor Michelle said, "Cross Lutheran Church has been on the right side of God's mission and justice by receiving refugees from Central America and other parts of the world. It is a sanctuary and partner for the people of El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Guatemala."

Pastor Michelle names Cross' retired pastor, the Rev. Kenneth Wheeler, as a mentor and friend who influenced her faith and vocation. Pastor Kenneth was an active leader in the Bread of Healing Empowerment Ministry, stressing the importance of never losing hope—a key element of working with those living in poverty.

Cross' ministry restores hope to those who have lost it. Serving the community meals and providing medical care are a small part of the ministry.

Faith is at its heart. Prayer, study, and worship are where the real transformations take place. The church holds a weekly Bible class that is open to the community. Each Wednesday about 60 to 80 people join to study the word of God, meet with neighbors, and grow in faith.



## New Beginnings Lutheran Church, Denver, Colo.

In urban Denver, New Beginnings Lutheran Church is not a typical worshipping community. Members at Holy Trinity in Hawaii and Cross Lutheran Church in Milwaukee come from the surrounding neighborhoods. Those who worship at New Beginnings live here: They are women in prison.

The Rev. Terry Schjang, an ELCA pastor, was called to lead the 14-year-old ministry in 2013. For Pastor Terry, the call came during a successful radio advertising career in New York City. It was there that she heard a voice saying, "This is not where I want you to be."

She said she couldn't "put into words" how that happened, but she knew "with all certainty that this (the Denver Women's Correctional Facility) is where God intended me to be. I knew God wanted me inside those walls in some way."

First, she was called to serve on the fringes of prison ministry. She said she was an advocate for people who felt forgotten—people who felt they were not heard.

When women first come into the facility, they are put in "seg"—a segregation unit where they are alone for 23 hours a day, Pastor Terry said.

They are chained, watched, and alone as they are evaluated for the level of liberty they will have while in prison. With the encouragement of other inmates, they enter New Beginnings after being released from seg, she said, adding that many prisoners report that being a part of the faith community has saved their lives.

Pastor Terry's work includes leading weekly Friday worship, forgiveness classes, and Bible study. New Beginnings is a synodically-authorized worshipping community that exists solely for the community inside the prison. She also serves as chaplain for the entire facility and runs a separate ministry for staff and inmates who might not belong to New Beginnings.

With nearly 1,000 inmates, the maximum-security Denver Women's Correctional Facility is the largest women's prison in Colorado. The average inmate age is 30, a majority have dropped out of school, and nearly 50 percent have no high school diploma or GED.

The ministry is comprised of the unchurched, many of whom don't believe God could love them, especially after the lives they have lived, said Pastor Terry.

It takes grace, grace, and more grace, she said, plus Lutheran theology to help them see that they are children of God.


The stories and personal histories of these inmates are heart-wrenching, she said. Many were raised in unhealthy households, and turned to drugs and alcohol.

One woman's story in particular stands out in Pastor Terry's mind.

In middle school, this New Beginnings member witnessed her father having an affair. She told her mother, who then committed suicide. As a young girl, she turned to drugs to help ease the pain.

She had been incarcerated eight times for drug abuse before she understood God had forgiven her, before her hope was restored.

A native of the West Indies, Pastor Terry found hope on the beach. Her relationship with God and love of the outdoors have been a constant in her life, she said. She felt closest to God on the beaches in her country where the waves offered hope.

"In this place of confinement, I am amazed to feel the Holy most often—in a place that doesn't have the slightest sea breeze blowing through it." 

**Jan Rizzo** has served in professional nonprofit communications for more than 30 years. Currently, she is working as a consultant specializing in church communications.



## GIVE IN SECRET

NO CATCHY SLOGANS by Emma Crossen

**Introduction**

“When you give, don’t let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, for God loves a cheerful giver. Be like the widow in the temple, who gave all that she had.”

It’s not uncommon to read or hear a message like this among Christians. Take a few moments to think about where you’ve heard something similar, or when you’ve spoken these words, yourself. Were you at church? With children? In a small group in your congregation?

*(Time for reflection)*

Giving money is an important topic for Christians to consider. All congregations need money to pay pastors, care for buildings, and support ministries. All people need encouragement and guidance about their relationship to money. Few things affect our daily life more. It seems appropriate that the Bible gives so much attention to money and giving.

Yet, it’s too common to see Bible passages taken out of context, turned into catchy slogans, and enforced as rules that Christians should follow. Take, for instance, that message above: “When you give, don’t let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, for God loves a cheerful giver. Think of the widow in the temple. She gave all that she had.”

If it sounds a little strange, it should. It’s made up of ideas from three different Bible passages. Yet, it sounds like a lot of stewardship messages that take

verses out of context to make a point about how Christians should give. Typically, the point of the message is something like: “Give more and feel good about it.”

Yet, when we combine biblical ideas about giving into catchy slogans, we fail to take each message seriously. In this summer Bible study, we’ll take a deeper look at three Scripture passages that are frequently used to reinforce certain “rules” about giving. We’ll consider why these passages don’t provide the neat, catchy rules that many of us have been told to follow. When we look deeper into each, we’ll see how they can give us far more insight into how and why our giving matters.

**As you prepare****Materials you may want**

Bible, open to Matthew 6:2–4

Note pad for yourself

One easel or large board for the group, to take notes during the group discussion (optional)

**Hymn**

This Little Light of Mine (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 677)

**Focus verses**

So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know



what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. (Matthew 6:2–4)

In this first session, we turn our attention to these three verses tucked into the middle of the Sermon on the Mount.

## READ MATTHEW 6:2–4 ALOUD.

### Talk about it

In pairs (or all together if you're a small group), share your responses to these questions. Allow five minutes for discussion.

1. What "rule" about giving emerges from this passage?
2. How do you feel about this rule? Do you follow it?

In my experience, this passage is used to encourage two rules about giving.

- Give in secret. Don't talk about your giving.
- Let others give in secret. Don't ask about their giving.

Did anyone come up with other giving rules that come from this passage? If so, share them with the group now.

We can agree that these verses have inspired many expectations—and sermons—about giving. Yet, when we zoom out and put these verses in context, we'll see that Jesus has a lot more to say than "give in secret" and that, in fact, he may not say that at all.

### A famous sermon

Matthew records these verses in the middle of the Sermon on the Mount. Spanning three chapters (Matthew 5–7), it is the first and longest sermon by Jesus recorded in the Bible. After the adult Jesus is baptized (3:13–17) and spends time in the wilderness (4:1–11), he makes

his home by the Sea of Galilee. He recruits his first disciples and starts healing and teaching throughout the area. "His fame spread," Matthew writes, and he attracts large crowds wherever he goes (4:23–25).

One day, the crowds follow him up a mountain. According to Matthew, it's here that Jesus preaches some of his most memorable lines, including the Beatitudes (5:3–12), the Lord's Prayer (6:9–15), the verse about storing up treasures in heaven (5:19), the Golden Rule (7:12), and the passage about the lilies of the field (6:28). This long speech has become known as the Sermon on the Mount.

### Alms, prayer, and fasting

Matthew 6:2–4 comes in the middle of the sermon, in a section that begins with these words: "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven" (Matthew 6:1). With this introduction, Jesus then offers advice about three religious practices that would have been familiar to his audience—giving alms, prayer, and fasting.

REPEAT MATTHEW 6:2–4. Then read out loud the next two biblical selections about prayer (6:5–6) and fasting (6:16–18). (See "Good for the Soul," p. 22.)

### Almsgiving

So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. (Matthew 6:2–4)

### Prayer in Matthew 6:5–6

"And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites;



for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”

### **Fasting 6:16–18**

“And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”

### **Talk about it**

3. Compare each set of verses. What similarities do you notice between how Jesus addresses almsgiving, prayer, and fasting? What phrases appear in all three sections?

The structure of each passage is similar. It goes something like this:

1. Don’t be like the hypocrites.
2. The hypocrites do this practice to get noticed by others.
3. That’s the only reward they’ll get.
4. Instead, do your practice in secret.
5. God will see you and reward you.

### **Giving to the poor**

Recall how Jesus introduces this section in Matthew 6:1.

“Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.”

During Jesus’ time, Jews adopted at least these three prominent ways to “practice your piety,” which

is another way of saying “practice righteousness” or “make yourself right with God.” Though sinners, they had access to three rituals—alms, prayer, and fasting—to persuade God to intervene for their well-being in this life and to ensure their place with God after this life. When Jesus preached on the mountain, his audience would have been familiar with all three practices. Notice that Jesus doesn’t take time to explain these practices. He says “when” you give alms, fast, and pray, not “if” you do.

The phrase “give alms” is sometimes translated “give to the poor.” It referred to a direct donation from the giver to the person in need. Beggars were an accepted part of the social structure in Jesus’ time. Alms were the primary means of assisting the poor. For Jesus’ audience, hearing about “alms” or “giving to the needy” would have brought to mind this kind of direct interaction between the giver and the receiver.

It’s important to remember what image these words would have conjured for Jesus’ audience, because it may be different from what comes to mind when we hear these words today.

### **Talk about it**

4. In pairs, share what images come to mind when you think about giving to the poor.

### **Different time. Different charity.**

The very concept of charity has changed significantly since Jesus preached about alms on a hillside in Galilee. Today, much of our charitable giving goes to organizations. Giving to the poor usually means giving to a church or another organization that carries out programs to benefit the poor.

Only a portion of our donation will end up in the hands of someone who is poor. We’re okay with that because we think organized programs are more effective at helping people deal with poverty or get out of poverty. We usually frown on giving to beggars in the



street, preferring that those who are poor seek help from the organizations we support.

Today, we tend to “give to the poor” by donating time or money to organizations that do one of three things:

- give away immediate assistance, like food, clothing, utility assistance or medical care.
- help people find jobs or otherwise become self-sufficient.
- advocate for government to spend more of our shared tax resources on programs to help the poor, and to pass other laws that benefit those who live in poverty.

When we compare this type of charity to almsgiving, two significant differences appear.

### **Less contact with the poor**

Today, our ways of giving to the poor involve less direct interaction with the people who are poor. Almsgiving, on the other hand, was specifically a way for the donor to interact with the recipient. In fact, the interaction was the primary focus of almsgiving. Jews in Jesus’ time understood that God was present, or incarnate, among the poor. To interact with the poor was to interact with God. The importance of this act was so great that, by Jesus’ time, many Jewish texts considered almsgiving to be of equal or greater value than sacrifices made in the Temple.

Through alms, individual Jews interacted with those who were poor and thereby interacted with God. Observant Jews would have seen beggars as an opportunity to carry out an important ritual: giving alms. (See “With You,” p. 6.)

According to Matthew’s gospel, this understanding of alms was at the heart of Jesus’ ministry. In Matthew 25:31–46, Jesus tells his disciples that they will ultimately be judged on the basis of one factor—whether

they fed the hungry, welcomed the stranger, gave drink to the thirsty, and visited the prisoner. If not, he says, God will say, “Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me” (Matthew 25:45). Then, he says that God will send them “away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life” (46).

For Jesus, there was something important and unique about interacting with those who receive our gifts. We should take note of this. If our giving does not include interactions with those who are poor, we may be missing something that was vital to Jesus’ understanding of how people interact with God. (See, “Because We Love,” p. 19.)

### **More focus on change**

The second difference between almsgiving and modern charity is the goal of the gift. Much of our charity today is aimed at change. We try to change an individual’s situation by supporting programs that give him food during a period of unemployment or help her get education to become more self-sufficient.

We try to bring change to many by reducing poverty in entire communities and nations. We have different ideas about how to do this (Improve our schools? Increase wages? Build affordable housing? End wars? Strengthen the social safety net?) but the goal is the same: to eliminate the factors that perpetuate poverty. Often, we speak of “ending the cycle of poverty.”

Almsgiving was not used as a way to end poverty for anyone. In his book titled *Charity*, theologian Gary Anderson says that this would have been unthinkable for Jesus and his followers: “To think of poverty as a social problem that could be solved was not really imaginable in the mindset of pre-modern man.”

In a society with no instinct to end or reduce poverty, almsgiving provided a socially acceptable way for society’s most vulnerable to have their basic needs met. In that time and place, family networks determined



one's social status, way of earning a living, and access to resources. Those who received alms, such as widows and orphans, were typically estranged from these familial networks or without them altogether. Almsgiving was an acceptable way for the society to deal with their need.

Our ideas about charity have changed. For the past 2,000 years, Jesus' concern for the poor has inspired Christians to organize new ways of responding to poverty. From shared community treasuries among the early Christians to hospitals and orphanages in the Middle Ages to advocacy networks and social enterprise today, Christians have expanded their imagination of what is possible and responded to poverty in new ways. (See "Stretching the Broth," p. 16.)

Yet, all of this came later, after Jesus preached on the hillside in Galilee about giving your alms in secret.

### **Beware of your motivations**

#### **READ AGAIN MATTHEW 6:2–4.**

We've concluded that Jesus was not talking about the type of charity we do today. Instead, he's talking about a spiritual practice called almsgiving. It's a practice that we don't do today, at least not in the same way that Jesus and his followers did.

If we turn Matthew 6:2–4 into a catchy slogan about giving to charity in secret, then we miss the rule that Jesus was trying to convey. This rule was about much more than giving. It is summed up in the verse that introduces this section of the sermon: "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven."

Remember that practicing piety refers to the acts you do to strengthen your relationship with God. Today, we may no longer emphasize alms, prayer, and fasting, but we still believe in the idea that we can and should take action to grow in faith and reorient our lives to God.

No matter what the act is, the rule is the same: Beware of your motivations. Don't do these acts in order to be seen by others.

### **Activity**

5. In 1 to 3 words, write down something you do as a spiritual practice. It could be alms, prayer, or fasting, but it might also be journaling, a morning run, or something else entirely.
6. Return to Matthew 6:2–4. Replace the words "give alms" with the words you wrote. See how Jesus' advice can apply to other practices.

### **Does "secret" mean "secret"?**

Doing things in secret is one way to avoid the temptation of unhealthy motivations. But did Jesus mean that we should always do all spiritual practices in secret? That's the catchy slogan that has emerged from this verse: Don't tell anyone about your giving. Don't ask about their giving.

Yet, if we take Jesus literally about giving only in secret, then wouldn't we also need to take him literally in verses 5–6 and avoid all forms of public prayer?

If praying in secret is a rule, we violate it every time we worship.

When we consider that Jesus is warning against unhealthy motivations, against doing spiritual practices *in order to be seen*, we can see that he may be using exaggeration to make his point. Take, for instance, the line "do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing." To follow that advice is physically impossible, but the image is evocative of the unhealthy motivations he is warning against. If you are worried about your right hand impressing your left, how much more will you be concerned about impressing other people.

### **Let your light shine**

If we use Matthew 6:2–4 to justify secretive giving, then we also ignore an equally important message from



the same Sermon on the Mount. If you sang the hymn at the beginning, you know this verse well.

**READ MATTHEW 5:14–16.** “You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”

According to these verses, we are to let others see our good works. If charitable giving is a good work (and Jesus seems to think it is) then shouldn't others see it?

Christians treat giving as a spiritual act, a way of practicing our piety and reorienting our lives to God. We believe that everything we have comes from God and God calls us to share these gifts by giving to our churches and other worthy causes.

There are many ways in which sharing your giving experience can inspire others to give more and grow in their relationship with God. Think of all the Christian finance experts who share their giving experiences through radio, videos, and books.

Has your congregation ever hosted a workshop about financial and estate planning? This could be a great benefit to members who are burdened with worry about how to care for themselves and their family. (See “Live Generously,” p. 10.)

Likewise, many churches invite personal testimonies about giving during worship to inspire others in the congregation to support the church's important ministries. These are all ways in which talking about your giving can inspire others to give glory to God.

We get a much better set of rules when we read these two passages together.

The call to let your light shine in Matthew 5:14–16 does not dampen the warning that comes later, in Matthew 6:2–4. Rather, it makes the warning all the more necessary.

Doing good works and letting your light shine are crucial parts of a Christian life. However, Jesus cautions, there's a risk that comes with letting your light shine to glorify God.

The risk is that you'll start expecting others to shine their light on you. When you do good works, it's likely that you will be seen by others, and it will be tempting to let their approval become your motivation. Beware of this. If you want to progress spiritually, find a way to get your original motivation back.

### **Talk about it**

7. In pairs, respond to this question: Has there been a time when you realized that you were giving to charity for the wrong reason? How did it affect you? Did you make any changes to get your motivations in check?

### **Prayer**

Pray the prayer that Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 6:9–13.

Our Father in heaven,  
hallowed be your name.  
Your kingdom come,  
your will be done,  
on earth as in heaven.  
Give us today our daily bread.  
Forgive us our sins,  
as we forgive those who sin against us.  
Save us from the time of trial  
and deliver us from evil.  
Amen.

### **Further reading**

*Charity: The Place of the Poor in the Biblical Tradition* by Gary Anderson, 2013, Yale University Press. 🌿

**Emma Crossen** is the development director at the Courage Campaign. She studied ministry at Harvard Divinity School and previously served Women of the ELCA as director for stewardship and development.



# MAKING UP OUR MINDS

by Audrey Novak Riley

In Paul's second letter to his beloved (but aggravating) Corinthians, Paul reminds the believers about a collection for the saints in Jerusalem, suggesting that the Corinthians get their contributions ready in advance. And he says: "Each of you must give as you have made up your mind . . . for God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Corinthians 9:7).

We've all heard the part about God loving cheerful givers, but what catches my eye each time is the first part, "Give as you have made up your mind."

That's an interesting idea, isn't it? He's telling the believers (including us) to think about our giving, make up our minds, and then act according to the decision we've made. He's telling us to sit down and *calculate* before we give.

What? Calculate? But that sounds so crass, so unspiritual. What about giving from the heart? What about leaving room for the Holy Spirit's working?

Okay, we get that stewards have to be prudent and farsighted, but come on. We've heard enough about stewardship to last us the rest of our lives. We want to be disciples. What does Paul's advice have to do with discipleship?

In the Gospel of John, we're told that Jesus' traveling band of followers kept a common purse that Judas was in charge of (see John 12:6, 13:29). Clearly it must have been a well-filled purse since even with Judas skimming from it, there was enough to book a big upper room and buy the groceries for a good Last Supper for the whole group. Who kept that purse plump? The Gospel of Luke tells us:

"Soon afterwards [Jesus] went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, as well as some women . . . who provided for them out of their resources" (Luke 8:1-3).

It was the women among the traveling band of disciples who supported the work. The women who were closest to Jesus' earthly ministry supported him not only with their presence and their prayers, but with their own money. That's how these dedicated women acted on their faith in Jesus. This was their ministry, their part in Jesus' mission—their discipleship.

Luke writes that Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susan, and "many others" supported Jesus' saving work in this way. We can be among those "many others" in our own day, in our own discipleship. There's nothing unspiritual about that.

## Disciples Who Make a Difference

The women whose generosity kept Jesus' traveling band of disciples fed and sheltered made a difference far beyond what they could possibly have imagined. Here we are, thousands of years and thousands of miles away, and we're still benefiting from their giving to that common purse. What a testimony to the power of dedicated disciples—even now, even us—who make up their minds to make a difference. 🌿

Audrey Novak Riley serves Women of the ELCA as churchwide director for stewardship and development.





### Decisions for discipleship

Now that we've realized that discipleship includes giving as well as prayer, worship, study, and service, we can start working on what Paul suggests—making up our minds.

First, how much shall we give? The answer is, it depends. Everyone has necessities—food, shelter, health care, education for ourselves and our children, saving for future necessities, and so on. At times, these necessities take up all the resources we

have—and that's normal. No guilt allowed. Then there are other times when we have some left over after we take care of the necessities. Rejoice and be glad—because then we can give to support Christ's work in the world.

Some people make up their minds to give a certain percentage of their resources. Some people call that "proportionate giving." This is a wise decision, since if times change, we can still feel secure that we



are giving as generously as we always did. Which leads to the next decision.

What part of Christ's ongoing mission do we want to support? Do we want our generosity to go into the common purse to be used where it can do the most good? In that case, we can give to Women of the ELCA: General Fund and rest assured that our gifts will be used for vital ministry.

Or perhaps our hearts are moved by the prospect of supporting other women in their callings. Giving to Women of the ELCA: Scholarships Fund or Women of the ELCA: Grants Fund might be our choice.

Or we might want to support the work of women throughout our church who are working to start health ministries in their congregations. In that case, giving to Women of the ELCA: Raising Up Healthy Women and Girls would be our choice.

If we make up our minds that our gifts should be invested to benefit the many ministries of Women of the ELCA far into the future, we might give to Women of the ELCA: Katie's Fund.

Perhaps we want to support another Lutheran ministry, for example, ELCA World Hunger or Lutheran World Relief's Project Comfort: Freight for Quilts ministry. A good way to do that is by giving to that ministry *through* Women of the ELCA. When we make a gift through Women of the ELCA, every cent of our gift goes to the ministry we name, and the fact that we gave through Women of the ELCA is recognized by the wider church.

### **Together or by ourselves?**

We disciples have another decision to make, too, right? What about whether we give as individuals or together with other disciples on the road with us?

We don't have to choose either-or. We can do both. It's up to us. We get to make up our minds.

—Audrey Novak Riley

## **THANKOFFERINGS**

Women's groups often organize Thankoffering services in their congregations, inspiring people throughout the church to grateful generosity. What a wonderful way to come together in discipleship.

But congregation-wide Thankoffering services aren't the only way. We can act on our gratitude and give a Thankoffering any time we want, together or by ourselves.

Our congregation's Women of the ELCA treasurer can handle our Thankoffering gifts quickly and efficiently. Let's make sure to include her in our prayers of gratitude.

Thankofferings are sent directly to the churchwide expression of Women of the ELCA for use in ministries that benefit all the women of the church. Our Thankofferings support not only the daily operations of the churchwide organization, but also our grants and scholarships programs, our online presence, and more.

## **INDIVIDUAL GIVING**

Many individuals give to Women of the ELCA by mail, by telephone, or online. Here's how:

**By mail:** Make out your check to Women of the ELCA and write your ministry designation on the memo line—whether you decide to give to the General Fund, Grants Fund, Scholarships Fund, Katie's Fund, Raising Up Healthy Women and Girls, ELCA World Hunger, LWR Project Comfort: Freight for Quilts, or any other ministry.

Mail it to:

Women of the ELCA

ELCA Gift Processing Center

P.O. Box 1809

Merrifield, VA 22116-8009.

**By telephone:** Call 1-800-638-3522.

**Online:** Visit [www.womenoftheelca.org](http://www.womenoftheelca.org) and click on the "Donate Now" link at the top right of the page.



## GIVING BY OTHER MEANS

Did you know that we can give to Women of the ELCA through other organizations? Thrivent members can direct their Thrivent Choice dollars to Women of the ELCA. Many large companies match their employees' or retirees' charitable giving. Check with your company's human resources department to find out more.

## LEGACY GIVING

Not long ago, a congregation in New York learned that it would receive a large bequest from the estate of a Jewish woman who had died in Austria.

How did that come about? What connection did Frau Helen Mark have with this church in New York? Three elderly members of the congregation remembered her, a very quiet woman who had come to church for a few years long ago, soon after World War II.

An Austrian-born concentration camp survivor, she had married an American soldier—John Mark, a Lutheran—and moved to New York with him after the war. The couple began attending their neighborhood church, where they took their places in the back pew on most Sundays. Although the Marks were regular attendees, Helen did not convert to Christianity. She retained her Jewish faith.

According to the parishioners who remembered Helen, the horrors of the war years had left her withdrawn and virtually silent. But during the time Helen and John were

part of the life of the congregation, she began to heal.

After a few years, the Marks moved away and eventually the congregation lost touch with them. After John's death, Helen moved back to the land of her birth to live with a cousin, one of the few remaining members of the family.

Then, many years later, Helen wrote her will. When her cousin went over it with her, the cousin asked, "What's this Lutheran church in New York doing in your will?" Helen told her cousin that this small Lutheran church—long ago and far away—had "loved her back to life." And so now, at the end of her life, she wanted to give back.

This congregation, when it receives a large gift, has a practice of tithing to ministries beyond its walls. The committee decided that the tithe from Helen's bequest should go an ELCA-affiliated organization that serves domestic violence survivors and incarcerated women.

The pastor had grown up with Women of the ELCA. That pastor, the

## GIVING IN OTHER FORMS

Gifts in the form of stock, bonds, real estate—or almost anything else—can be directed to or through Women of the ELCA, thanks to our partnership with the ELCA Foundation, whose staff members are dedicated to helping people like us to support our ministries in many ways.

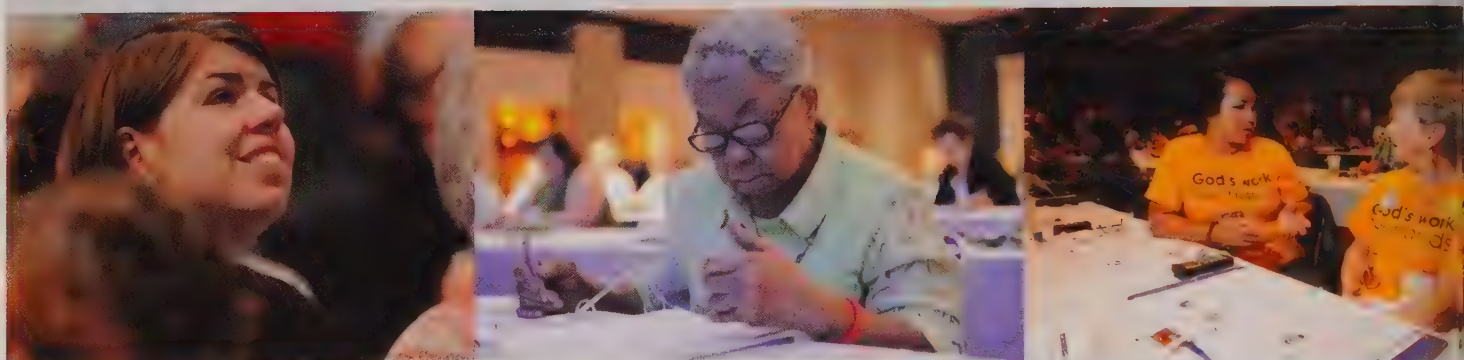
Rev. Elise Brown, particularly loves *Gather* magazine, which has been her primary connection to Women of the ELCA in recent years. She suggested that the tithe be directed to Women of the ELCA, and the committee agreed. When the motion came to a vote during the congregational annual meeting, a council member proposed that the tithe be doubled—and so Women of the ELCA received nearly \$18,000 from the estate of Helen Mark, through Advent Lutheran Church, the congregation that had loved her back to life.

Legacy gifts like Helen Mark's are a wonderful way to support organizations that have been important to us. No matter the amount of our own resources, our planned gifts can make a lasting difference for the ministries we love.

Women of the ELCA is honored to work with the ELCA's national network of gift planners, who are available to help any of us make wise arrangements that will serve women far into the future.



# #WeAreWELCA



Women from more than 7,000 ELCA congregations in the U.S. and the Caribbean are committed to raising awareness and preventing human trafficking.

Join us as we inform, educate and mobilize women in their congregations and communities, through prayer, ministry and political action.

Tell the youth and adult leaders in your congregation to find Women of the ELCA at the ELCA Youth Gathering in July.

Women <sup>of the</sup> **ELCA** 







## GRACE NOTES

## Generous Givers

by Linda Post Bushkofsky



# Women of the ELCA

is here today as an organization thanks to generations of women who came before us. Women organized first in congregations, then in the larger community, and eventually into national women's organizations.

From the beginning, Lutheran women in North America used the power of their purses to answer the call to make a difference. Women's organizations often started as groups that provided financial and material support to the church, whether sponsoring international mission personnel, funding new church buildings, or providing meals to seminarians.

Just as we do today, women then gave generously to the church, but they increasingly supported their own ministries, programs, and publications, developed by women for women. Our foremothers laid a foundation that we build on today.

Our foremothers built strong women's organizations, equipped with resources that make a difference in the world. When we donate to Women of the ELCA, that's what we are supporting.

Here's an example of generous women creating legacies through the women's organization. Two endowment funds were established, one in 1916 and one in 1921, to support ministries in Liberia. Could the women who established those endowments have imagined that their gifts would continue to support education and medical missions in Liberia nearly a century later? They surely never anticipated the long civil war that ended in 2003 or the recent Ebola virus outbreak. Yet these faithful

women made it possible for Women of the ELCA—who inherited these funds from a predecessor organization—to continue providing support at critical times in the life of that nation.

Women of the ELCA holds several other endowments, the oldest of which goes back to 1904. Interest earned on these endowment funds goes to the purposes established by the original donors, women like you and me who connected their faith and their finances.

As active participants in Women of the ELCA, we still connect our faith and our finances in many ways. We give *regular offerings* when our congregational unit meets for Bible study, service projects, general meetings, or discussion groups. We offer up our grateful hearts through *Thankofferings*, gifts made in response to God's grace in our daily lives.

Our generous giving in regular offerings and Thankofferings makes it possible for the churchwide organization to provide resources, publications, trainings, and more to women throughout our church.

We also support the *Katharina von Bora Lutheran Endowment Fund* (known as "Katie's Fund") with gifts for leadership development, ministry in daily life, and global partnerships.

And so, not only do the endowments established by our foremothers in faith continue to bear fruit today, but so do the habits of generosity they planted. How can we build on that foundation for future generations of women? 🌸

**Linda Post Bushkofsky** is executive director of Women of the ELCA.





AMEN!

## God, Our Source

by Catherine Malotky

## God, your abundance

surrounds us. At this time of year, the signs are everywhere. Fields sprout green where there was once only soil; itself, a quiet miracle. Trees leaf out, and flowers bloom. Insects, birds, animals and their young—there are so many signals that the earth is awakening yet again from winter's slumber. You are the creator of this holy cycle. Your provision is steadfast!

It is a wonder, then, that we so often feel our lives are spare. We lose track of the miracles that happen every day. We focus on the pain and hardship; we notice those places where we are less than, and have less than. We can feel barren and deprived.

This is especially true given the cultural cacophony that surrounds us. Every advertisement is predicated on convincing us we need something to satisfy the yearning we are told we have, and the assumption is, this yearning can be quenched with just this product!

What if our yearnings are deeper? What if they are a cry to be loved, and known, and valued? What product will solve such a deficit? What material thing will fill our souls until we are secure in our worthiness? None. No product will do this for us.

In the end, only you, God, can be the wellspring from which we draw. You, our creator, have made us lovable by you. You know us beyond our own capacity to know ourselves. And you, Almighty, call us beloved and wonder-full. You, who know also our shadow sides, our vulnerabilities, our sin, you call us your

own, of more value than the lilies of the field, in all their beauty.

Gracious God, from this place in your embrace, teach us to see your bounty and celebrate its extravagance. From this place at your table of love, teach us to care for ourselves because we are your own. From this place in your economy, teach us to welcome all as if they were you incarnate.

Help us see what we need to be healthy and whole, and to long for the health and wholeness of each other and the creation. Guide us to give from our abundance, trusting in your largess.

We can feed the hungry. We can welcome the stranger. We can give drink to the thirsty. We can visit the prisoner. We can change the systems that perpetuate poverty, exclusion, and isolation. We can refuse to keep score, holding each other as your beloved, including our own selves.

And, dear Jesus, when we are captivated by consumerism's siren song, when we misplace your loving claim on us, when we lose our way, find us again as you have promised. Find us in our own Good Friday suffering and bring us out of death into Easter's promise of new life. Your generosity knows no end. Your extravagance is without boundary.

Call us out again, as you have before, to serve our neighbors, joyfully turning to you for life and love and welcome. Amen. 🌿

**The Rev. Catherine Malotky**, an ELCA pastor, serves at Luther Seminary as a philanthropic adviser. She has served as a parish pastor, editor, teacher, and retreat leader.





## THE DANCE IS ON

Representatives of Women of the ELCA's synodical organizations met in Chicago, Feb. 20-22, where they gave more than \$4,200 in gift cards to a local organization that works to end human trafficking in Chicago.

The theme of this year's conference was "The

Dance is On." The group, including 60 presidents, two vice presidents and six executive board members, wrote letters to government officials protesting human trafficking, tied about 50 fleece blankets for Lutheran World Relief, and learned a little about line dancing.

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